Choosing quotes from source material

Most instructors who assign academic papers for class want students to find research materials to help them formulate ideas and claims about specific topics or issues. It is from these source documents that students also will find specific examples of supportive evidence, in the form of quotes or information they can paraphrase, to help lend credibility to their paper. But how does a student know what to select as evidence?

# Steps to selecting evidence for academic papers

1. Prepare for reading your articles by anticipating their content and asking yourself questions about what you will be looking for in them.
2. Read each article and mark/highlight any ideas that may be new or interesting.
3. Pay special attention to any specific statistics or facts, unique definitions, or unusual viewpoints.
4. Your research will help you think about what position you will want to take on your topic and how you will organize your paper. After creating a thesis/claim and outlining your paper, go back over the highlighted information in all your sources and match the **very best pieces of evidence** to the main points of your outline that are in support of your thesis.

Integrating quotes into your writing is an essential part of a research paper, but to do it well you need to think about what function the quote serves in your work.

The **purpose** of a quote is to **support** a position or main idea that the writer has made. Quotes are normally used in body paragraphs rather than in introductory or concluding paragraphs. By using quotes, the writer is saying to the reader, “I have something to say about this topic and here is an authority/credible source who more specifically supports what I am saying….”

*Note: Quotes may be used in an introductory paragraph to create interest in the topic for the reader. In this case, it is usually a profound statement, a surprising perspective, or a startling fact/statistic.*

One rule of thumb is to begin the body paragraph with a general **topic sentence**. Then, write your more specific thoughts about the general idea as **your commentary** on the topic. Next, use a **quote** or paraphrase to give even more specific information that supports your comments. This information can be in the form of statistics or a more detailed example of what you want to explain.

# Using quotes to support, not repeat

The quote you use should not restate what the writer has just said. This is unnecessary repetition.

## Repetitious:

If something doesn’t happen to increase their food supply, orca whales will be gone in 100 years. “Orca whales are on a path to extinction within a century unless they get a big increase of Chinook salmon to eat” (Mapes, 1B).

## Not Repetitious:

Orca whales are in peril. ***[Topic sentence]*** The danger to the South Puget Sound is that if this species dies off, the entire ecosystem will be disrupted and other sea life may also disappear. ***[Commentary]*** Scientists say that if nothing is done to protect them, “the populations will continue to decline and there is a 25 percent chance the whales will be lost within 100 years” (Mapes 1B). ***[Supportive quote with specific statistics]***

# Using quotes to support a claim or main point

Rarely should a quote *begin* a body paragraph. Since its purpose is to support a position or main idea, unless some information precedes it, there is nothing for the quote to support.

## Unsupported Quotation:

“The Port of Vancouver, B.C., in a pilot program last summer, asked ships to cut their speed to 11 knots to reduce noise levels in a 16-mile-long area of the orcas’ prime feeding ground” (Mapes 6B). This experiment was tried to improve the echolocation system that orcas use to hunt the food they need to survive and was very successful. ***[Great information in the quote, but what previous point is it supporting?]***

## Supported Quotation:

Proponents of restricting the speed of sea-going vessels in areas where whales hunt believe this will give orcas relief from the noise that interferes with their echolocation system. ***[Topic sentence]*** In the last few years NOAA created rules limiting boat speeds around orcas. The idea to create a wider quiet area has been tried successfully in several places already. ***[Commentary]*** According to reporter Lynda V. Mapes, “The Port of Vancouver, B.C., in a pilot program last summer, asked ships to cut their speed to 11 knots to reduce noise levels in a 16-mile-long area of the orcas’ prime feeding ground. More than 61 percent of ships using Haro Strait voluntarily participated” (6B). ***[Supportive quote with specific statistics and detail]***

Note: Most instructors prefer that quotes be introduced with a signal phrase. This begins the sentence in which the quote will appear and identifies the author, or the article title if there is no author. In the above example the signal phrase is “According to reporter Lynda V. Mapes.”